

I Was Just Wondering...Why Don't I Enjoy My Devotions?

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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1 Corinthians 9:24-27

Today's question is a wonderful, honest question. In your bulletin the question reads simply, "Why don't I enjoy my devotions?" But the question we received from the young people was actually longer than that. The full question, as originally submitted, was, "I don't really enjoy my devotions and I don't enjoy coming to church that much, so how can I get a closer relationship with Jesus?" That's an honest question. It's honest in the way that sometimes only a young person can be honest.

Because it's true, right? Church isn't always enjoyable. Some Sundays the hymns we choose aren't your favorite. Some Sundays the prayer is really long. Some Sundays, maybe most Sundays, the sermon is a little dull and I'm up here talking and waving my arms about something that really doesn't seem to have much to do with your everyday life. And all this while you have to sit on those hard wooden pews.

Sometimes devotions aren't so enjoyable either. You've had a long day at school and then you had play practice at night and in the little scraps of time in between school and dinner and play practice, you furiously crammed for your math test. As you crash into bed, you dutifully read your Bible. You're going through the Psalms because everyone says the Psalms are great. You open up your Bible, compose yourself, and read Psalm 7. 'Arise Lord in your anger, rise up against the rage of my enemies.' The psalmist talks about how God will shoot flaming arrows at his foes. Yesterday you read Psalm 6 where the psalmist talked about how his eyes were weak from sorrow, and how he floods his bed with weeping. Neither of these Psalms is an enjoyable read, and neither of them fits your situation. You're not flooding your bed with tears, and you don't have any enemies, at least not any you want shot with flaming arrows. This is an honest assessment about how many of us have felt about both church and devotions, and today's question comes out of that feeling. I want to address this good, honest question with these good, honest words from Paul. Read 1 Corinthians 9:24-27

How do these words help answer your question? Let me put them in context. Paul is in the middle of a long section of his letter where he's addressing a group of people in the Corinthian church who love to have fun. These are people who love a good party; they love a good time. In particular, these people want to party with the pagans. Corinth, like just about all big cities in the empire, had regular parties at the pagan places of worship.

In the city there were multiple temples to multiple gods, and each of these temples would hold festivals during the year. Everyone was invited. Families came. There would be lots of yummy food, and the drink would flow. People had a good time. Think of a big community fourth of July picnic, only it took place inside the temple to a pagan god.

Before they became Christians, these partying Corinthians all went to these parties, and they loved them. Now that they were Christians, they wanted to keep going to these pagan parties. After all, they said, idols were fake, right? They were just pieces of wood and stone. The gods weren't real, so they should be able to keep having a good time with their friends. 'Hey, we're still Christians, we're still on Jesus' team, what's the big deal?' This same 'why should my faith get in the way of a good party' attitude apparently tipped over into their Lord's Supper celebrations. Later, in chapter 11, Paul complains that some of them would try to turn the Lord's Supper into a frat party. They were getting drunk during the Lord's Supper.

In our passage Paul is pushing back on the partiers. 'You guys are undisciplined,' he says. 'Following Jesus takes discipline! It's about training and focus. You guys seem to be completely focused on enjoying yourself. You're focused on the fun.' 'But when you follow Jesus you're not focused on fun,' says Paul, 'You're focused on loving God and your neighbor, and building his Kingdom, and that takes discipline. It takes training. It takes focus.' 'Look at me for example,' says Paul, 'In pursuit of that prize I beat my body, I run this race with everything I have.' Paul says that he trains so hard, that he strikes a blow to his body, literally he says he gives himself bruises, as he pursues the goal of becoming full of the life of Jesus

What does this tell us about your question? Your question says 'I don't enjoy church. I don't enjoy my devotions.' We've got to get that word 'enjoy' in the right place. We've got to get perspective on that word.

When you follow Jesus, you will have lots of fun. There will be times of laughter and pleasure. But the journey is not about the fun. The journey isn't aiming at the fun. It's aiming at Jesus and his Kingdom and his righteousness. It's aiming at becoming a person who is in a loving relationship with Jesus, and then letting that love spill over into the lives of our neighbors. Jesus calls us to this life and when he does, he tells us that as part of the process, we will have to do lots of things that aren't so fun. We will have to pick up our cross. We will have to make sacrifices. We will have discipline ourselves like a runner training for a big race.

Young people, do you know what they sometimes call activities like prayer and worship and Bible reading? They call them spiritual disciplines. Disciplines. What's a discipline? Something hard. Something that you sometimes have to force yourself to do. When you practice a discipline, you push enjoyment to the side, you voluntarily take on some pain so that you can grow and become stronger and experience a great joy, a greater pleasure later.

Paul uses sports as an analogy. He compares it to running. Let me use the example of soccer. Soccer was my sport growing up and I spent a lot of time at soccer practices. As part of the training there, we would run wind sprints. We would start on the goal line, sprint as fast as we could to half field, then jog back, then sprint to half, then jog back, then sprint to half, then jog back. We did it over and over and over again. It was definitely not enjoyable. We also did endless trapping drills. If you want to get better at soccer, you have to learn to control the ball. No matter how the ball is coming towards you, fast or slow, high or low, bouncing or spinning, you have to be able to control that ball. Without using your hands, in one touch, you've got to be able to make it drop in front of your feet. So my coaches would throw the ball at me, kick the ball at me, bounce the ball at me and over and over again I would trap it, control it and pass it back to them. Was it fun? Was that enjoyable? No! It was tedious and boring.

But, all this prepared me for greater pleasure and joy later on. Later, during the game when I was on the field with my teammates, effortlessly controlling the ball and moving it around, feeling the pleasure of my body running at full speed, feeling the joy of controlling a long pass and instinctively sliding the ball to a teammate who put the ball in the back of the net, the discipline of my training had led to a deeper, more substantial joy. Now if I had said to my coaches, "Coach I don't enjoy wind sprints. I don't enjoy these trapping drills," what do you think my coaches would have said? They would have said, "Peter, that's not the point. Now could you please get back in line." They probably wouldn't have said please.

Worship and devotions are spiritual disciplines. They are exercises for the shaping and conditioning of our souls. Running conditions the body; worship and devotional exercises shape the soul and open our hearts to God. Enjoyment is not their purpose! Now that doesn't mean there is no enjoyment in worship and in your devotions. We work to try to make worship enjoyable. We try to pick hymns that people enjoy. We created a beautiful sanctuary where it's nice to sit. When I write a sermon I try to make it at least somewhat enjoyable. But enjoyment is not the point; this is a spiritual discipline. In a worship service we are trying to uproot the sins from our life; we do that in our prayer of confession. Facing your sins and uprooting them is not fun. In worship we are being renovated by the Holy Spirit of God. We are asking the Spirit to renovate us. Renovation is hard work. It's heavy construction, and won't always be enjoyable.

Don't get me wrong. There is lots of joy in the Christian life. There is beauty and friendship! There are games and friends and laughter and life and good food and beautiful music. The Christian life is full of enjoyment. But worship and devotions are not the enjoyment parts; they are disciplines they are training that equip us for greater and deeper joy later on, the crown of life Paul talks about.

I know that I maybe sound a little bit like a grouchy old preacher who's basically saying, "You don't like worship? Too bad. Suck it up and take your medicine!" So I want to finish with three things that can put this all in a bigger context

First, even though devotions are a discipline and enjoyment isn't the point, it's OK to find spiritual disciplines that are more enjoyable for you. Not everyone is ready to just read the Psalms straight. Maybe you need a devotional that would help you understand what you're reading and apply it to your life. Not everyone likes reading the Bible by themselves; maybe you need to find some friends to study the Bible with, maybe that discipline would be more enjoyable. Do you have trouble praying by yourself? Does that feel stagnant? Find a group of friends and pray for each other. That might be more satisfying. Maybe you are a person who likes to think deeply. Grab a Christian classic like *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis. Read a chapter a day for your

devotions and journal about it. There are dozens of spiritual disciplines to choose from, and while enjoyment is not the point of any of them, it's ok to find ones that are more enjoyable if that helps you practice them.

Second, the training may not be enjoyable, but it prepares you for greater joy later on. The disciplines supply you with greater reserves of love and compassion and hope. In his excellent devotional for teens "Deep Down Faith", Neal Plantinga tells the stories of how POW's during the Vietnam War relied on the bits of the Bible that they'd learned in their youth. "As they sat on the floor of their cells, fearful and lonely, they tried as hard as they could to recall passages of scripture they had memorized when they were young." Someone could recite Psalm 23. Another knew a few beatitudes. Still another knew John 3:16. Others knew still more. They would tap these verses to each other in code, through the walls of their cells. By the time they were released they had collected over a 100 verses of Scripture. Later, when they were released, one of them said that these verses preserved their sanity and probably their lives.

All this soul training may not always be fun, but it is always good. It's not fun, but it's good. God is in this training and in all the singing and the listening and the reading and the praying, he's shaping your soul, he's giving you deeper roots, he's making you more substantial. Enter into this training and your joyful times will be more joyful, your love will be stronger and steadier, and your hope will be more resilient.

Finally, let me also say: you may not enjoy worship and devotions now, but because God's Holy Spirit is in it, because he is present here and his Spirit is slowly changing you, you may find that you start to enjoy it and even crave it, later on. All of us pastors visit people in the hospital, dealing with various conditions. Sometimes these ailments keep them out of circulation for a long time. They're in a hospital for a couple of weeks and then they have to go to a rehab facility, and then they go home and have to get stronger at home. Sometimes they are homebound for months. Do you know what those folk often say to us when they're in the middle of their recuperation? "I can't wait to get back to church. I miss church so much! My goal is to get back to church by Christmas so I can be in church and singing the hymns."

I promise you, when these people were young they were just like you. They thought sermons were way too long. They counted the cracks on the ceiling. They begged their mom for another peppermint. They poked their little sister in the ribs just to pass the time. But worship gets to you. The Spirit is in this place and it gets to you, it feeds you. It shapes your soul. And when, for some reason, you can't go, you feel hungry and thirsty and out of balance. You feel like the Psalmist who said, 'my heart yearns and faints for the courts of the Lord.' You just want to be worshipping with God's people, not because it is so fun, but because it is so, so good. Because God is here, because God's Spirit is moving and it is very good.

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